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TAGS: [ELAB](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: TUNISIAN UNION COMPLAINS OF GOVERNMENT INTERFERENCE

REF: 05 TUNIS 2206

Classified By: AMBASSADOR WILLIAM HUDSON FOR REASONS 1.5 (b) AND (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: During a February 7 meeting with Laboff on other topics, General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) Assistant Secretary General for International Affairs Mohamed Trabelsi criticized the GOT for restricting press coverage of the UGTT's 60th anniversary celebrations in January. Trabelsi alleged the GOT used its control over the local press to ensure that the UGTT anniversary activities did not receive coverage in the Tunisian media. He claimed that positive coverage would have reminded Tunisians of the union's key role in gaining independence and creating the modern Tunisian state, an evolution for which the GOT traditionally claims full credit. Although anniversary events took place around the country over a weeklong period, local press coverage was limited to selective stories that mainly highlighted President Ben Ali's support for the UGTT. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) The UGTT, the only union federation in Tunisia, was founded on January 20, 1946. The labor movement predates the Tunisian independence movement, and many labor activists were among the most important crusaders for independence during the French colonial period. Today, UGTT membership includes approximately 25 percent of Tunisian workers from around the country, arguably making it the largest domestic civil society organization.

13. (C) Trabelsi told Laboff that the 60th anniversary was marked by a week's worth of intellectual, cultural and sporting events throughout Tunisia. Participation was strong, with attendees coming from regional and international labor organizations and including thousands of UGTT members across Tunisia. Events included celebrations around Tunisia, a forum on labor's role in development and democracy, a roundtable on the "labor memory" in which the descendants of Tunisia's most important labor leaders participated, a stone-laying for a new workers' institute in Tunis, and a visit to the grave of UGTT founder Farhat Hached. Despite the success of these events, Trabelsi complained that there was limited local press coverage, "because the state claims it alone is responsible for everything good in Tunisia: independence, workers and women's rights, and economic development."

14. (C) The UGTT weekly newspaper, ash-Shaab, gave extensive coverage to the anniversary activities, including more than ten pages of articles. The ash-Shaab front-page headline declared, "Ben Ali congratulates laborers," while an article inside reprinted the text of the President's letter to the UGTT. Meanwhile, other local papers, which generally give extensive coverage to President Ben Ali's activities and personal messages sent to local and international organizations, were selective in their coverage of the anniversary. For example, the Tunisian mainstream press

published articles about Ben Ali's donation of land for the new workers' institute and a UGTT letter thanking the President for the donation, while the President's letter to the UGTT praising their role in economic development was largely ignored.

15. (C) COMMENT: The UGTT is not the first civil society organization to complain about government interference or limited press freedoms, but it is the largest and most politically important. Despite its complaints, the UGTT leadership maintains a close but cautious relationship with President Ben Ali. This means the extent of its activism and independence "ebbs and flows" according to one senior Tunisian labor activist. END COMMENT.
HUDSON